

Jennifer Jeffcoat
March 23, 2009
English 335: paper 2
Dr. Ainsworth

And He Saw that it was Good

John Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, recounts the traditional Christian creation story, however, Milton delivers this powerful tale in such way that he all but defies the reader to question what truly makes something good or evil. Questions of fate, purpose, and free will flooded my mind while reading this poem and I found myself considering things I never dreamed I would: for example, God is evil and Satan is a hero. God made Satan and all the angels, knowing what would happen. He created Adam and Eve, again knowing the outcome. Some could argue that God is evil because He made these things happen, that if He is truly all-powerful and good, He should have stopped the mistakes from being made. But we must distinguish between the words "make" and "allow," and truly understand the idea of free will in order to see that God's actions are rooted in love and goodness.

The phrase "God's plan" is often used to justify things that go on in our lives, whether they are good or bad. We find a way to smooth over uncomfortable or unpleasant situations by simply saying *they are*, or *it was*, "God's plan." What this phrase implies, however, is that everything in life happens because God has preordained it, and that He is in fact, making it happen. If this were the case, however, mankind would still be living in the Garden of Eden, conversing with God face to face. If God's plan was forced upon us, we would all be living in total perfection, rather, God allows things to happen, because to deprive us of our ability to choose would be to negate His own perfect law, "As if Predestination over-rul'd/Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree/Or high foreknowledge; they

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themselves decreed/Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,/Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault." (*Paradise Lost* 3: 114-118) This passage shows the difference between what God *forces* to happen and what He *allows*, showing that though He knew the outcomes, He would not take away His creation's ability to make their own decisions. God permits evil to exist so that His creation can never say that they were forced into anything. If we think of evil as an alternative, or a necessary means of providing a choice, we see that it is necessary in order to insure free will truly exists. It could be said that God forced His creation to have a choice, but He allows those choices to be made to that creations own accord.

Milton approaches the concept of free will quite thoroughly by addressing the topic in other works such as *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained*. By studying the themes of temptation presented in both these texts and *Paradise Lost*, the idea that free will is a necessary and good tactic becomes evident. In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton begins, in *Medias Res*, showing us an already weakened protagonist. Though the story begins after Samson's hair has been removed, Milton, by writing, "Vast, Unwieldly, burdensome,/Proudly secure yet liable to fall/By weakest subtleties," (*Samson Agonistes* 54-56) shows the reader that Samson has indeed made a choice that has caused him to go against the will of God; otherwise there would have been no "fall." The story of Samson furthers the idea that the actions of God regarding his creations' mishaps are, in fact, good by later showing God's grace and forgiveness when true repentance is seen. God had a plan for

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Samson, but Samson fell victim to sin and disobeyed God. Because Samson is a descendant of Adam and Eve he was born into sin. *Samson Agonistes* depicts the consequences of Samson's decision—imprisonment and blindness—but God did not personally *make* these things happen. God told Samson not to tell anyone the secret to his strength, and Samson disobeyed, thus altering the course God intended. Due to the situation his choice left him in, he suffered unpleasant consequences, yet later in the text we see God forgive Samson and allow his strength to return thus showing His innate goodness, which he granted in return for the true remorse Samson felt and the repentance he confessed.

Paradise Lost shows us that both angels and humans were given the gift of free will. Seeing as how this is what led to the fall of mankind and the banishment of Satan and his followers from heaven, it may be hard to consider free will a gift, but imagine the world without it. We would all be mindless, purposeless beings completely incapable of influentially interacting with the world around us; unable to choose the paths we want to follow, "I made him just and right,/Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall./Such I created all th' Ethereal Powers/And Spirits, both them who stood and them who fail'd;/Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell." (*Paradise Lost* 3: 98-102) If we are asking ourselves to consider what the definitions of good and evil are, we must ask if we could consider God to be good if He takes away our ability to make a decision. God goes on to explain a few lines later that He specifically gave His creation free will to insure that any loyalty they

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paid Him would be sincere, saying that He would get no joy from praise that was given under requirement. The text clearly points to the fact that God viewed free will as a necessary means of allowing His creations to intentionally map out their course, and not as a secret weapon that would insure their fall.

The recurring word here is *choice*, meaning that there are multiple ways to go on any one idea. So far we have seen creation make choices that led to a fall, however, in *Paradise Regained*, Milton presents us with the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Because the protagonist in this story is the Son of God, some might think that the temptation was not of the same caliber as that of Adam and Eve, or Samson. To that, I would remind the reader that Jesus was sent to earth in human form. He lived a human life with human wants, needs, and desires; therefore, He was victim to the same temptations of every other member of creation. In each of these stories, *Paradise Lost*, and *Samson Agonistes*, the characters have been armed with the knowledge that they should not disobey. Satan knew God was King of Kings, Adam and Eve were told that the consequence of sin would be death, and Samson was told not to tell the secret of his strength, yet every one of them disobeyed. In *Paradise Regained*, however, for the first time we see how God reacts when his creation *chooses* to avoid sin. After three failed attempts to sway Jesus, Satan is finally forced to leave, and in the wake of Jesus' triumph over sin, God pours out love and kindness upon his creation. The portrayal of true goodness is seen in the pure delight and love God bestows on His creation in

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return for nothing more than loyalty. This outpouring of love from God is an example of the true understanding of accountability. His actions show us that He will just as freely extend love and reward to his creation for their obedience, as He will exact punishment for evil.

Good and evil are portrayed in *Paradise Lost* through the actions of the characters. It could be thought that because the consequence of disobeying God is so harsh it can in no way be considered good, but we must make a distinction between the terms justified punishment and true evil. Just because there are consequences for actions does not make the one in command an evil being. Claiming that God is an evil tyrant because of His harsh treatment of Satan over one mistake is akin to a child refusing to ever say they love their parents again simply because they were sent to their room for disobeying. Though the punishment for Satan's disobedience was substantially more severe than Adam and Eve's, the circumstances were also very different. Satan and his followers were heavenly beings. They lived and existed fully in God's presence and witnessed His majesty completely. Therefore, they had a concrete idea of not only whom they were going up against, but also what the stakes would be should their attempt fail. Adam and Eve, on the other hand, did not. Though they communed with God and angels, they could never have truly understood the immensity of God's power, "They themselves ordain'd thir fall./The first sort by thir own suggestion fell,/Self-tempted, self-deprav'd: Man falls deceiv'd/By th' other first: Man therefore shall find grace,/The

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other none." (*Paradise Lost* 3: 128-132) Even if Satan and the fallen angels could repent, Milton uses the following passage to suggest that evil is unavoidable when choice is allowed as we hear Satan say, "But say I could repent and could obtain/By Act of Grace my former state; how soon/Would highth recall high thoughts, how soon unsay/What feign'd submission swore: ease would recent/Vows made in pain, as violent and void./For never can true reconciliation grow/Where wounds of deadly hate have pierc'd so deep." (*Paradise Lost* 4: 93-99) Again we have to consider the position of God. Though He certainly did not want His creation to fall, He, due to His laws granting choice, had no choice but to let Satan act according to his own desire. Ask now is God wrong for having punished Satan when even Satan himself admits that what he did was wrong? The Bible states that the powers of God are unfathomable to mankind. Due to this, God, out of love and compassion for his creation, derived a means for mankind to be saved. If Satan and man's fall were a part of some devious plan God had to display His power and show off His strength, I would think it odd for Him to care deeply enough to sacrifice His only perfect Son to save those whom he forced to fail. The first passage also shows how the evil of Satan and man's sin is used to perpetuate the just and good actions of God by showing that God recognized Adam and Eve were tricked into sin and therefore should not be punished as harshly as those who initially conceived of the idea to sin.

History is littered with stories of people who punished the masses, whether that punishment was just or not: Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse-Tung, Joseph Stalin; each of

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these men were responsible for outrageously heinous acts; together they killed millions upon millions of people, and at times, even their own countrymen. Not once did any of these men attempt to find a way around their acts of cruelty. Never did they consider that there might be a way for their captives to repent for their “wrong doings.” Their victims were innocent people whose crime was existence and nothing more. In *Paradise Lost*, however, we see people doing wrong, they blatantly disobey the rules of God and God delivers a just punishment, yet still, though He is totally warranted in His actions, we see God go out of His way to offer a means of forgiveness to humanity. I found it interesting that even in this we see God offer a choice, not only to His Son, but God Himself must also choose to be willing to let his only Son die for a race that was destined to fail Him. “Father, thy word is past, man shall find grace... Behold mee then, mee for him, life for life/I offer, on mee let thine anger fall... Freely put off, and for him lastly die/Well pleas’d, on me let death wreck all his rage.” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 227, 236-237, 240-241) Evil exists in the world because Satan wanted to be equal to God and when that attempt failed he decided to exact revenge on God by causing his creation to fall. God would be no more inclined to stop Satan from trying to cause the fall of man than he was to stop Satan’s initial sin. Therefore all the actions of God that follow the fall of man are simply damage control. The bottom line is that God did not have to give man a way to be saved, but the conviction to justice He felt within Him allowed a way for the rest of mankind to have what Adam and Eve gave up through disobedience.

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Evil is not necessarily the result of every choice we make, but it is birthed out of choice, and as we have seen, choice is not something God is willing to take away from His creation. The goodness of God is seen in that He offers a means of forgiveness and grace in spite of our tendency to fail Him. God allows us the opportunity to be saved rather than making us live, eternally damned, in hell. I believe that Milton's works show that evil may not be necessary for good to exist, but it is something that can be, at times, unavoidable for those under God's rule, especially mankind. Because God allows free will and does not force His desires upon us, we have to expect that at some point we will fail Him. But God, in His mercy, understands and sees the big picture. He recognizes that in an existence where beings who are incapable of grasping the omnipotence of God are allowed to choose for themselves, there must be a way to exact just consequence while at the same time providing a way for the mistakes made to not eternally damn those who fail.